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# The AZTEC PEOPLE



*"Go until you find a place where an eagle on a  
cactus kills a serpent. Build your city there."*



*The word Mexico comes from the name of one of the tribes that lived in that land, the Mexicans. In the Mexico of old there were many tribes and kingdoms but none as powerful as the Aztecs. This booklet tells you something of the life of the rulers of Anahuac, as Mexico was called in the Indian language.*

# The Aztec People

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An Aztec Merchant



IT IS LATE AFTERNOON. A band of weary Indians stand on the shores of a lake. The blue-green waters ripple in the bright sunlight around an island in the middle of the lake. The Indians are watching an eagle gliding over the bright water. Suddenly it swoops down on a cactus growing on the island, striking at a large snake coiled in the cactus as it lights. As the group on shore watches, the eagle tears the writhing serpent with its powerful beak.

The Indians are glad to see this, for it is the sign they have been seeking. It means that their wanderings are ended, for many years ago a priest of their tribe had said, "Go on until you find a place where an eagle on a cactus kills a serpent. Build your city there."

That is the legend of the founding of Tenochtitlán, the beautiful city which the Aztecs built for their capital where Mexico City stands today. The legend has been told for hundreds of years. You will be reminded of it every time you look at the flag of Mexico, with the eagle perched on the cactus holding a snake in its beak.

More than 600 years ago the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico from the North. No one knows the exact spot from which they came nor how long they had wandered. Some say they had made as many as twenty different settlements, but always left them to move on. There is a story that when they came to Lake Pátzcuaro some of them wanted to stay there. Perhaps they liked the spot because the swimming was good. But while they were in the water the leader ordered the others to take the clothes of the swimmers and continue to march. When the swimmers came out, they were ashamed to follow naked, so they founded a little colony at Pátzcuaro. The main body of the Aztecs finally arrived in the Valley of Mexico where there lived rich, powerful tribes. They allowed the Aztecs to settle on the little island in the lake, because they thought it would be difficult for them to make a living there.

The island was little more than a swamp. Around a few houses that stood on poles driven into the water, the Aztecs set to work to build more land. They wove loose mats of roots and reeds, placing the coarse framework in the water. From the bottom of the lake they scooped mud and piled it on the mats. On these small floating islands or *chinampas*, as the Aztecs called them, they planted vegetables and flowers.

At first these little islands could be towed around like rafts. It was very convenient, for if you didn't like your neighbors, or if you wanted

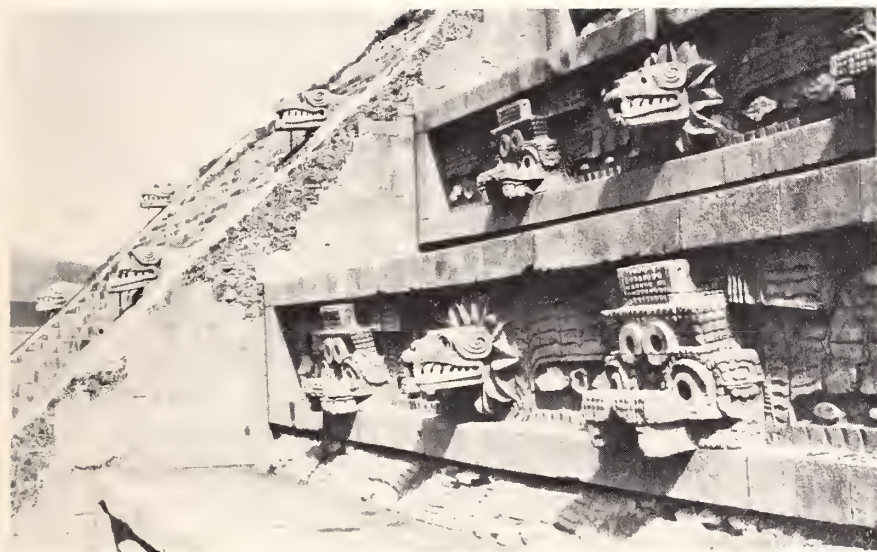
a change of scenery, you could tow your island to a different spot in the lake. Gradually, however, the roots grew longer, fastening themselves into the bed of the lake and anchoring the islands. More and larger chinampas were built as the Aztec tribe increased.

One of the first things that the Aztecs wanted to do was to build a temple to their god, Huitzilopochtli. But there was little wood, lime or rock on the island. So they took the things of which they had most—fish, frogs and water fowl—trading them to their neighbors for building material. In the center of the settlement they built the temple, around which huddled rude cottages of mud called *adobe*, or of grass and reeds. Many of these houses were perched on poles driven into the lake to keep them above the level of the water.

For many years the Aztecs remained a weak nation. Three strong tribes surrounded them, any one of which might swoop down on the island without warning. The Aztecs met this danger in a clever way. When their leader died they chose one whose mother was from one of the enemy tribes, thus assuring peace between themselves and that particular tribe for many years. At another time they chose a leader whose wife came from a tribe that had forced them to pay heavy tribute. The following year the tribute was reduced to two ducks, a few fish and frogs.

In spite of these clever tactics, the Aztecs often had to fight against their warlike neighbors. In war and in peace they were steadily growing into a stronger nation. Finally, about a hundred years after they first came to the shores of the lake they had conquered all other tribes, who now had to pay tribute to the Aztec masters.

One of the most beautiful cities in the world arose on the island where they had settled. In the central square there was a great pyramid built of stone. One hundred and twenty steps led to the top, where two temples, one to Huitzilopochtli, warrior god of the Aztecs, and the other to Tlaloc, the god of agriculture, stood. Nearby was the enormous palace in which the ruler of the Aztecs lived in great splendor. Store rooms in the palace were filled with gold and silver and precious jewels. Many hundreds of servants were kept busy serving the emperor on pottery or gold and silver dishes, which were never used a second time. Delightful gardens surrounded the palace and an aviary with thousands of birds stood next to a great zoo filled with animals from every part of the kingdom.



Many temples as well as houses for the priests and government officials stood in the square. In the shadow of the great pyramid was the stone used for sacrifice, and nearby was the altar at which the priests worshipped. A wall so wide that almost a dozen people could walk abreast on it enclosed this central square. The houses of the wealthy were made of stone or of adobe covered with white or deep red plaster. Hundreds of men swept the streets each morning. In some parts of the city instead of streets there were canals, looking from a distance like blue ribbons running between the great stone buildings. Everywhere there were flowers and bright shrubs blossoming in gardens or on the roofs of the houses. Beyond the tidy parks and the stone palaces were the homes of the poor, which had changed little in a hundred years from the rude huts the Aztecs built when they had settled on the swampy island.

Four great causeways, each with a number of bridges, connected the island with the mainland. Towering over the Valley, standing guard over the City, two volcanoes wore their mantle of snow the year round. Sometimes their cones stood sharp and clear against the blue Mexican skies, but oftener a thin gray mist hung over the peaks.

The Aztec empire reached far beyond the City and the island, as more and more tribes were conquered, for the Aztecs were skilled warriors.

They were spurred on by the desire for more land, for slaves and prisoners to sacrifice to their gods. The territory they gained in war was divided among the warrior chiefs and the leaders of the empire. Costly gifts were demanded of the conquered tribes. In the capital of each province a storehouse was built where tribute was kept—huge bolts of fine cloth; bales of bright feathers; mounds of skins of jaguar, rabbit and deer; ornaments of gold, silver, emeralds, jade and amber. The storehouses also held all kinds of building materials, copper, thousands of gourds and the broad, green leaves of the century plant. The poor who had nothing for tribute gave their labor.

The market in the city of Tenochtitlan showed the variety and the riches of the Aztec empire. Every week on market day it was crowded with colorfully dressed people pushing their way to the booths which were filled with all kinds of merchandise. There were booths filled with fresh, scrubbed vegetables and many kinds of meat, grains and mounds of delicious, fresh fruit, and sheafs of flowers. Finely woven and embroidered cloth, handsome feather garments and beautiful leather work filled others. Handmade jewelry, fine carving and carefully molded pottery filled another. Inspectors moved through the market to see that each merchant gave honest weight or measure. Nearby the judges waited to punish those caught cheating.

As the stores of riches increased the Aztecs built more beautiful temples and made costlier offerings to the gods they worshipped. The most imposing temple was to their war god, Huitzilopochtli. In English his name doesn't sound very warlike. It means "Humming Bird of the South." Someone else has translated it "Humming Bird, Left-Handed One," probably because he was always pictured dressed in a cloak of humming bird feathers.

Since the Aztec people—priests, nobles, military and the poor—depended upon farming, and because their crops needed rain, the rain god was as important as the god of war. The rain god was always dressed in blue or green to represent water. His face was painted black, like the black clouds which brought rain. Many times during the season the rain god received sacrifices. The people feared that if they offended him there would be no food. There were also the gods of the soil, sun, wind, and many others.



A flower-loving people like the Aztecs of course had a special god of flowers, Xochipilli, who was also the god of feasting, dancing and ball games. Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, was worshipped both as a god and as a ruler. He was a less stern god than the others, except perhaps Xochipilli. It is said that he did not like to have people sacrificed to him, and so he started the custom of pricking different parts of the body with thorns to draw blood. He taught gentleness, peace and kindness. He had a fair skin and a long beard, and his clothes were adorned with crosses. An Aztec legend tells that one day he disappeared with a promise to return again, coming from the East.

A great many priests were needed to see that the gods were properly served. Most important were the high priests of war and agriculture. They presided over the religious ceremonies, dressed in colorful costumes and decked with bright green and blue feathers drooping from the back of their heads. Jade and emeralds set in gold were fastened in their ears and noses. A piece of the same precious stones made their lower lips hang as though they were pouting. Heavy bracelets clanked on their arms as they moved about. Their garments of the finest woven cotton were heavily embroidered and deeply fringed. Cloaks made of many colored feathers hung from their shoulders and soft leather sandals, decorated with gold and silver jewels, covered their feet.

The priests had a great deal of power, but they also had many responsibilities. Besides the temple ceremonies they taught school, prescribed medicine for the sick, and advised the farmers about the crops. Daily they looked at the calendar, to see if it was a lucky day for what they wanted to do. Even at night the priests got up and prayed and made offerings to the gods. There wasn't a chance to oversleep, for someone was always ready to sprinkle boiling water on the heads of the sleepy ones or to prick their ears and lips with long, sharp thorns!

Sometimes the young priests were sent into the woods at night to make offerings of pine and incense to the mountain gods. Instead of whistling in the dark to keep up their courage they rubbed themselves with a mixture of ashes of burned snakes, poisonous insects, and tobacco. As they stole through the darkness, they listened carefully for sounds, each of which had a special meaning. For example, if they heard what sounded like a man cutting down a tree, it was a sign that some great misfortune would



*An Aztec Priest*

overtake their tribe. Aztec women could be priestesses, but their services were mostly housekeeping. They swept the temples, kept up the sacred fires and put incense on the altars.

The Aztec merchants were almost as important as the priests and warriors. They travelled far and wide throughout the country, picking up a great deal of useful information. Roads were well kept for these merchants to travel over, and beyond the villages rest houses were built where they would spend the night. The merchants had their own god, too, who was always pictured with a staff in one hand and a blue and yellow shield in the other, wearing a blue cape over his shoulders and golden rings in his ears. His face was painted red and black. Sometimes the merchants waited several days for a sign from their god that the day was lucky for their departure. But once they set out they would not spoil that luck by looking back. Porters bending low under the weight of the packs travelled with them, and sometimes soldiers went along to protect the merchants. Should harm come to a merchant from an enemy tribe, it was a reason for going to war.

Like their god, their merchants always carried a staff, which they treated as something sacred. At the end of the day they placed their staffs together, sprinkling them with the blood they drew from their tongues, lips or ears with sharp thorns. Before turning homeward the merchants always consulted their god to be sure their arrival would fall on a lucky day. If luck was with them, there was a great festival called, "Washing the Feet," an appropriate name after such a long trip afoot!

The Aztecs were very careful about the education of their children. Since children were educated to follow in the steps of their parents, the boy whose father was one of the leaders would be educated to take his place as a leader. The military man's son would be educated for war, the merchant's son would follow that career, the farmer's child would spend his life in the fields, and the child of the poor parents who had nothing but a hut to shelter them and scarcely enough food to eat would never have more.

When a baby was only a few days old its parents placed a toy, tool or weapon in its tiny hands. If the father was a warrior, the toy was a tomahawk or a sling. The farmer's baby clasped his fingers about the pointed stick used as a hoe. The girl babies were given a spindle for





*Aztec warriors in a boat*



weaving or were put through the motions of making the thin round corn cakes called *tortillas*. This was to show that they must learn to work. When the children were five or six years old the parents who could afford it, handed them over to the priests who had charge of the schools.

Aztec schools were no place for lazy boys and girls. The schools were usually attached to the temples, where priests taught the boys and women taught the girls in separate classes. If boys and girls ever met or spoke they were severely punished. And there didn't seem to be much chance to pass notes either. The boys had classes in history and the traditions of their people, and they were trained in handicraft and whatever work their fathers did.

When their lessons were finished they had other tasks, such as helping to keep the temples clean, chopping wood, preparing the paint with which the priests decorated themselves, and cutting the maguey thorns for drawing blood. The children of the nobles and lords were educated in schools kept especially for them. But these were even more strict than the others. These boys would some day be the high priests, the leaders and the military men of high rank. They must learn thoroughly the history and traditions of their people. Physical training was very important, too. The children of the nobility, in spite of their high rank, had to do janitor work around the temple, getting up in the night to serve at the altars, fasting, praying, and pricking themselves with thorns.

To be a warrior was an ambition of most of the boys. When they were twenty, they were ready to fight. Rather than kill in war they tried to take prisoners for sacrifice. After taking his first prisoner, the young Aztec warrior could cut off the long pigtail that hung down his back, and paint his body yellow and his face red with yellow marks on his temples. But the unfortunate boy who fought several battles without taking a prisoner single-handed, was put out of the army and scorned as a coward for the rest of his life. Never could he wear cotton clothing or have embroidery on any of his garments.

The girls were kept as busy at school as the boys. They had many of the same lessons and were taught to spin, weave and make lovely embroidery. They learned to prepare food for offerings to the gods and three times during the night to pray to the gods.

Although the Aztec children were kept very busy, they did have amuse-

ments, which were supervised by the priests. Everyone learned to dance, because the dance was an important part of Aztec religion. Every religious festival had its own dance, which often lasted for several days and nights. Even the king took part in the dances, but he always danced alone. These dances were held in the temple, or sometimes in the public square with hundreds of people taking part.

One of their dances was danced in circles. The musicians stood in a little group in the center. The people of highest rank formed an inner circle around them. Outside this circle the people of next highest rank formed another, and so on until circles were formed with all the people who wanted to join in the dance. Each circle had its special steps to perform, each dancer had to be careful to keep the circle perfectly round, and all of the circles had to keep in time with the music. This was not always easy to do because clowns danced in and out through the circles, doing comical steps to amuse the people. When one circle got tired the dancers dropped out and others took their places.

Although the Aztecs were very clever at all kinds of handicrafts they had few musical instruments. The drum was used more than any other instrument. One kind of drum was made by hollowing out a log so that only a thin piece of wood extended from the ends. When these tongues were struck with rubber-tipped drumsticks they made a deep rolling sound that could be heard for more than a mile. Another type of drum stood on three wooden legs. It was covered with deer or snakeskin and beaten with rubber-tipped drumsticks. Figures of gods, animals or religious scenes were carved on the sides of both drums.

Flutes were made of bamboo or clay. Small pottery whistles with two finger holes, usually molded in the shape of birds, made a shrill sound. The only stringed instruments the Aztecs had was the gourd, which they also filled with pebbles, shaking it like a rattle in time with the music. A stick rubbed across a notched bone was another of the Aztec instruments. It was about as musical as running a stick along a picket fence. Strings of shells worn on the arms and legs of dancers added to the noise, if not the music, of the dances.

Like all legends and traditions, those of the Aztecs were handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. But the Aztec people kept records by painting pictures of what happened. These painters of

history sat day after day painting on long scrolls or on pages folded like a screen. These were called *códices*. The paper was made of maguey leaves washed and highly polished. Sometimes the *códices* were painted on skins of animals, the bark of trees, or on cotton cloth. They painted in almost every color—bright blues, red, deep purple, yellow, orange and green. Each picture was outlined in black. Studying history from a brightly colored codex couldn't have been very dull.

Sometimes the *códices* told long stories about the life of some important man or about some great event. For instance, there is one which shows a warrior bringing in a prisoner. Another scene shows the young brave stretched on a couch of jaguar skin, as a priest bends over him in the act of piercing his nostrils so he can wear a nose-plug, a decoration of honor. In still another scene he is in a canoe. To show that the canoe is on the sea and not on a lake, the painter put some seashells in the picture. The Aztecs had hundreds of these picture records, but so far as we know only fourteen are left now.

The Aztecs played a game of ball much like our game of basket ball. The courts, enclosed by walls fifteen feet high, were almost 200 feet long and 30 feet wide. The walls were decorated with pictures and signs of the god of games. Long rows of trees grew around the court. At each side of the court was a stone ring about two feet in diameter set high up on the wall. Instead of throwing the ball into a basket, the Aztec players



tried to throw it through the rings. This wasn't easy to do because the players were only allowed to touch it with their knees and hips. It seldom happened, but if it did the crowd gathered around the player, sang songs and gave him gifts.

The players never entered the game without first making offerings to the gods. Usually they placed the ball on a clean plate the night before and hung their hip and knee pads on a pole. Then they made offerings of food and flowers and incense. Sometimes the player sat up all night and in the morning breakfasted on the food he had offered. Great crowds turned out to watch the games from the walls of the court. The people became greatly excited and placed heavy bets on the games: It is said that sometimes those who had nothing to bet would bet themselves. The loser became the slave of the person with whom he had bet.

One of the stories told about the games is that sometimes people got so excited that they threw their own clothes and jewels into the court for the players who made a goal. Players, according to other stories, had the right to demand the clothes of anyone in the audience. There was always a wild scramble from the wall when anyone made a goal.

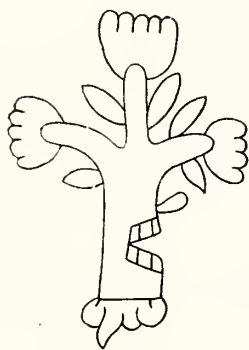


It was market day in Tenochtitlan many years after Columbus discovered America. Great crowds pushed their way through the streets. Dozens of canoes skimmed over the blue waters of the canals. Wherever people stopped to talk they spoke always of the swift runner who had sped into the city that morning. Without pausing he had gone straight to the Palace and gasped out his story to the astonished priests there. Bearded white men, he said, had landed on the east coast of the country. They wore crosses on their clothes. They spoke a strange tongue. With them they brought things such as no Aztec had ever seen before. They rode on enormous animals, very strong and very swift, with huge eyes and mouths that made a terrifying sound. The strange men had weapons, too—not swords and spears, but something that exploded with a deafening



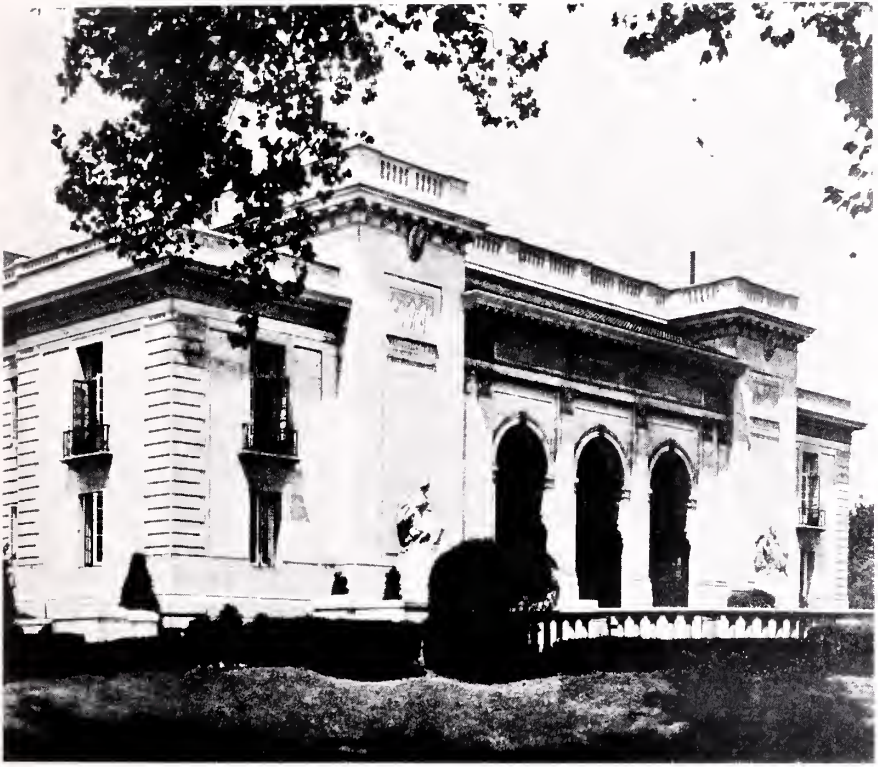
sound. And to prove that all was true that he told, the runner thrust into the hands of the listening priests a cloth hurriedly painted with bright pictures of these strangers and their animals. All that day as the people talked in the marketplace, the high priests bent over the bright figures of the painted cloth.

Some thought it was the fulfillment of the prophecy that bearded gods with white skins would some day come out of the eastern ocean. The Aztec people did not know it was the mighty Spanish captain, Hernán Cortés, who had landed with his men on the shores of Mexico.



# GLOSSARY

- ADOBE . . . . . A large brick made of straw and mud dried in the sun.
- CACTUS . . . . . A desert plant, usually covered with thorns.
- CAUSEWAY . . . . . A raised road built across water or swamps.
- CENTURY PLANT . . . . . A plant with long, broad leaves which got its name from the fact that it was thought to blossom only once in a hundred years.
- CODICES . . . . . Stories in picture writing painted on paper or skins of animals.
- GOURD . . . . . Fruit of a vine whose dried shell is used for carrying water and serving food.
- HUITZILOPOCHTLI . . . . . The Aztec god of war.
- INCENSE . . . . . The perfume or smoke from sweet-smelling spices or gums when burned.
- JADE . . . . . Stone of pale to dark green color.
- LEGEND . . . . . A story of some great event or famous hero.
- PÁTZCUARO . . . . . An Indian name meaning "place of delights." Also the name of a lake in Mexico.
- PROPHECY . . . . . Telling what will happen.
- PYRAMID . . . . . A building square at the bottom with four sides shaped like triangles.
- QUETZALCOATL . . . . . The name of an Aztec god.
- SACRIFICE . . . . . An offering to the gods to please them.
- TRADITIONS . . . . . Stories and customs that have come down from one generation to another.
- XOCHIPILLI . . . . . The Aztec god of flowers.



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